

We can be heroes, just for one day

Hong

"And the shame was on the other side

Oh, we can beat them forever and ever

Then we could be heroes just for one day."

The morning light filtered through the studio windows in dusty golden beams, catching on the chrome fixtures and illuminating the floating particles that always seemed to dance in the air of Ink & Ashes. I sat cross-legged on the worn leather sofa, surrounded by cardboard boxes and packing materials, a half-empty coffee cup balanced precariously on the armrest beside me and a box cutter in my hand. Around me, cardboard boxes formed a small fortress—deliveries that had arrived yesterday, stacked by the door because I'd been too tired to deal with them after closing.

My t-shirts. My designs.

The collaboration pieces with Tui were still the bestsellers, the designs we'd created together during late nights at the studio when neither of us wanted to go home to empty apartments. But my solo work was catching up. The nature series—delicate illustrations of flowers and insects and the small creatures most people overlooked—had found an audience I hadn't expected.

I pulled another box toward me and slit the tape with practiced efficiency. Inside, neatly folded and wrapped in tissue paper, were the newest additions to my little brand: hoodies this time, the fabric soft and heavyweight, my silver moth design embroidered across the back. I lifted one out, examining the stitching, running my thumb across the raised threads.

Good quality. Better than good.

I lifted the shirt out, checking the print quality against the original design on my phone. Perfect. The colors were exactly right—not too saturated, not too flat. The fabric felt substantial in my hands, the kind of quality that justified the price point I'd nervously set and then immediately second-guessed. Six months ago, this would have felt impossible. The idea that people would pay money—real money, not friend-discount money—to wear something I'd drawn? That my art could exist in the world, on strangers' bodies, walking through streets I'd never see?

I set the hoodie aside and reached for my coffee, taking a sip that had gone lukewarm while I wasn't paying attention. The bitterness grounded me, pulling me back from the edge of something that felt dangerously close to optimism.

My own work. My own vision. People were buying it because they liked my art. I

should have been happy. I was happy, somewhere underneath the static that had been filling my head for days. But the happiness kept getting interrupted by Yuki's voice, playing on a loop in my memory.

"He was crying, Hong. He gave me the flowers and asked me to deliver them, and his eyes were all red, and he just... left. Practically ran out of here."

Lego.

The name sat heavy in my chest, tangled up with frustration and worry and a particular kind of anger that I wasn't sure how to direct. I wasn't angry at Lego—how could I be? He was nineteen years old and desperately lonely and so determined to be sunshine for everyone else that he'd forgotten he was allowed to have storms of his own.

I wasn't even angry at Tui, not really. Tui was my mentor, my friend, the closest thing I had to an older brother in this city. He'd taken me in when I was a nervous first-year student with a portfolio full of nature sketches and absolutely no idea how to translate that into tattoo art. He'd been patient with my mistakes, generous with his knowledge, willing to let me grow at my own pace while gently pushing me to be better. But watching him fumble this thing with Lego was like watching someone repeatedly touch a hot stove and act surprised when they got burned.

"He's too young," Tui had said, the words I'd heard a dozen variations of over the past months. "I'm too damaged. It wouldn't be fair to him. He deserves someone who isn't carrying all this baggage."

And I'd listened. I'd nodded. I'd even agreed, at first, because the logic seemed sound. Lego was barely an adult. Tui was still working through the aftermath of things that had happened to him as a teenager—things he'd only told me about in fragments, late at night, when the studio was closed and it was just the two of us cleaning up and talking about nothing and everything. But logic and love didn't always align. And the more I watched—the way Tui's whole face changed when Lego walked through the door, the way Lego's brightness seemed to intensify in Tui's presence, the obvious mutual wanting that hung in the air between them like static electricity—the more I thought that maybe Tui's logic was just fear wearing a reasonable disguise.

Underneath the satisfaction, like a stone in my shoe I couldn't quite ignore, was the memory of Thursday.

The university hallway had been crowded with the particular chaos of end-of-semester energy—students rushing between classes, clusters of friends making plans, the constant background hum of too many people in too small a space. I'd been heading toward the art building, portfolio case slung over my shoulder, mind already on the exhibition preparations, when I'd spotted him.

He was standing near the vending machines, feeding coins into the slot with the careful deliberation of someone whose thoughts were elsewhere. His hair was shorter than I'd last seen it—the extensions gone, replaced by his natural dark waves that barely brushed his shoulders. He was wearing one of those oversized sweater in soft pink, dark jeans, boots that added an inch to his slight frame, the sleeves pulled down over his hands in that way he had, making him look smaller than he already was.

My feet had stopped moving before my brain caught up with the decision.

Keep walking, part of me had urged. You don't know anything. This isn't your business. But I'd never been good at taking my own advice.

"Lego."

He'd turned at his name, and for just a moment—a fraction of a second that I probably imagined—something flickered across his face. Fear? Recognition? The particular wariness of someone who wasn't sure what I knew or what I was going to say?

Then the smile appeared. Bright and practiced and so perfectly calibrated that it almost looked real.

"P'Hong! Hi!" Bright. Cheerful. The Lego that everyone expected. "I didn't know you were on campus today."

We'd talked. Casual things, surface things, the kind of conversation you have when you're both pretending the elephant in the room is just an unusually large piece of furniture. I'd asked about his classes. He'd asked about the exhibition. We'd discussed the weather, for fuck's sake, like two strangers at a bus stop instead of two people who'd been orbiting the same complicated constellation for months.

And the whole time, I'd been watching. Watching the way his smile didn't quite reach his eyes. The way his fingers kept tugging at his sleeve, a nervous habit I'd noticed before but never really catalogued. The way he held himself—carefully, precisely, like someone balancing on a wire who couldn't afford to look down.

He seemed calmer, yes. That was true. The frantic energy I'd seen in him before—the desperate brightness of someone running on fumes and stubbornness—had settled into something quieter. But quieter wasn't the same as better. Quiet could mean acceptance. Quiet could mean giving up.

Quiet could mean someone had finally stopped hoping for something that was never going to come.

"Portfolio review." I'd held up the case as evidence. "Professor wanted to see my progress on the exhibition pieces."

"Oh, right! The exhibition." Something genuine flickered in his expression—interest, maybe even excitement, cutting through the performance. "That's coming up soon, isn't it?"

"Three weeks." I'd found myself relaxing slightly. This was safe territory. Art. Work. Things we could discuss without touching the radioactive zones. "I'm showing four pieces."

Lego's smile had wavered for just a second. A tiny crack in the facade, quickly plastered over. "I saw the list of names," he'd admitted. "The people who are showing their work. Yours is on there."

"You've been paying attention."

"I always pay attention." Something about the way he'd said it—quiet, almost sad—had made my chest ache. "Especially to the people I care about."

Something had twisted in my chest then—affection and frustration and a fierce, protective anger that had nowhere to go. Because of course Lego had already known. Of course he'd been planning to show up and support me, even in the middle of his own quiet devastation, because that's what Lego did. He showed up. He brought flowers. He smiled through the pain and made sure everyone else felt loved, even when no one was doing the same for him.

We'd talked for a few more minutes after that. Surface things. His dance classes. My design work. The weather, of all things, as if we were strangers making small talk at a bus stop. And underneath it all, the unspoken knowledge had hummed between us like a live wire.

I know you heard something that hurt you.

I know you're pretending to be okay.

I know, and I'm pretending too, because that's what we do, isn't it? We all just keep pretending.

When he'd finally said goodbye and disappeared into the crowd of students, I'd stood there for a long moment, watching the space where he'd been. He'd seemed calmer than I'd expected. There was sadness, yes—I could see it in the shadows under his eyes, in the slight droop of his shoulders that he couldn't quite hide. But over that sadness, there had been something else.

Tranquility. Acceptance. The particular peace of someone who had decided to stop fighting a battle they couldn't win.

It should have made me feel better. It didn't.

Now, sitting in the morning quiet of the studio, I turned the memory over in my

mind like a stone I couldn't stop touching. The calm on Lego's face. The sadness beneath it, muted but present, like a bruise that had faded to yellow but hadn't quite healed.

He was letting go. I could see it. Whatever hope he'd been carrying for Tui—and he had been carrying it, I wasn't blind—he was carefully, deliberately setting it down.

And somehow, that made everything worse.

I finished my coffee and stood, stretching muscles that had stiffened from sitting too long on the floor. The boxes of merchandise could wait. I gathered the empty ones, flattened them efficiently, stacked them by the back door for recycling. The full ones I arranged neatly behind the counter, ready to be shipped when I got around to printing labels.

The bell above the door chimed, and I looked up to see Yuki slipping inside, her traditional sleeve visible beneath a light jacket, her expression focused in that way it got when she was preparing for a big session.

"Morning." She set her things on the counter and immediately started organizing her station. "You're here early."

"Deliveries." I gestured at the boxes surrounding me. "The shirts finally came in."

"Oh!" Her expression brightened. "Let me see."

I handed her the heron design, watching as she held it up to examine the details. Yuki had been supportive of my side projects from the beginning—genuinely enthusiastic, not just politely interested. She'd even worn one of my early designs to a concert and posted about it on her stories.

"This is gorgeous." She traced the lines of the bird's feathers with one finger. "The color palette is perfect. Very you."

"Thanks."

She studied my face for a moment, her artist's eye catching something in my expression that I thought I'd been hiding. "You okay? You seem... distracted."

I almost told her. Almost let the words spill out—my frustration with Tui, my worry about Lego, the way the whole situation felt like watching a slow-motion car crash and being powerless to stop it. But Yuki had her own things to deal with today. A major client coming in, a back piece that would require hours of focused work. She didn't need my drama on top of that.

"Fine," I said. "Just tired. Long week."

She didn't look convinced, but she let it go. "My client's coming in at two. We'll

probably go until close, maybe later. You'll be here?"

"For a while. I have class this afternoon." She nodded and disappeared into the back to continue her preparations. I heard her moving around, organizing her tools with the methodical precision that made her one of the best tattoo artists I'd ever seen work.

The morning stretched on.

I returned to the reception area, pulled out my sketchbook, tried to focus on the commission I'd been putting off—a custom piece for a client who wanted a sleeve of interconnected botanical illustrations, each flower representing a member of her family. It was the kind of work I usually loved, the kind that required research and precision and the particular satisfaction of making something meaningful. But my pencil kept drifting. The lines I drew weren't flowers. They were moths. Wings folded. Waiting.

The morning passed slowly. A few customers came and went—tourists mostly, drawn in by the flash art displayed in the window, leaving with stickers and temporary tattoos and the vague promise that they'd come back someday for "something real." One of Tui's regular clients stopped by to pick up aftercare products, chatting briefly about how the piece on his forearm was healing before heading back out into the Friday sunshine. I sold three t-shirts to a girl who recognized my Instagram handle. Through it all, the quiet pressed against me like something physical. The studio felt emptier than it should have, haunted by conversations that hadn't happened yet but were building like pressure behind a dam.

Around eleven, another tattoo artist stopped by—a guy from a shop across the city who'd ordered supplies through our distributor. Tui had been handling more of the wholesale side of the business lately, helping other artists get quality products at reasonable prices. It was good for the community, he said. Good for building connections. I helped the guy load his boxes of ink and aftercare products into his car, making small talk about the industry, exchanging Instagram handles. Normal stuff. Routine.

But underneath the routine, my mind kept circling back.

Yuki finished her preparations and retreated to the break room, probably getting food before her client arrived. I heard the distant sounds of the microwave, smelled something that might have been leftover curry.

And then Tui emerged from the private room. He looked tired. That was the first thing I noticed—the shadows under his eyes that suggested sleep hadn't come easy, the slight tension in his shoulders that he probably didn't even realize he was carrying. He was guiding his client toward the door, a young woman with fresh ink

wrapped in clear bandage on her inner arm, running through the aftercare instructions with practiced ease.

"Keep it clean and dry for the first few hours. Moisturize gently after that—I recommend the unscented stuff, nothing with alcohol. If you notice any unusual swelling or discharge, call us immediately, but some redness is normal..."

The client nodded along, clearly more focused on admiring her new tattoo than listening to the warnings. She paid, tipped generously, promised to send photos once it healed, and finally made her exit with the bell chiming cheerfully behind her.

Then it was just us. Tui and me, in the reception area, with nothing to fill the silence but the distant sound of Yuki's microwave and the weight of everything I'd been holding back for days.

He moved behind the counter, started organizing the supplies he'd used during the session. His movements were automatic, mechanical—the habits of someone who'd done this a thousand times and could do it without thinking. I watched him for a long moment. Watched the way he avoided my eyes. Watched the careful blankness of his expression, the mask he wore when he didn't want to deal with something.

Don't, I told myself. Just let it go. It's not your problem. But I'd never been good at letting things go.

More silence. I should have let it go. Should have focused on my shirts, finished my inventory, kept my mouth shut until it was time to leave for class. That would have been the smart thing to do. The kind thing. The thing that kept the peace. But I was tired of keeping the peace.

"So," I said, my voice cutting through the quiet like a blade. "Are we going to talk about it, or are we just going to keep pretending nothing happened?"

Tui's hands stilled on the ink bottles he'd been sorting. He didn't look up.

"Talk about what?"

"You know what." I crossed my arms over my chest, leaning against the doorframe that separated the reception area from the back rooms. "Lego. The flowers. Yuki told me what happened." Something flickered across Tui's face—guilt, maybe, or defensiveness, or some complicated combination of both. His jaw tightened.

"Have you heard from Lego?"

Tui's hands stilled on the counter. Just for a second—a pause so brief that most people wouldn't have noticed. But I noticed. I noticed everything. "I texted him." Tui's voice was carefully neutral. "He hasn't responded."

"Since when?"

"Since..." He exhaled. "Since Wednesday. After Yuki told me what happened."

"Three days." I kept my own voice level. "He's been ignoring you for three days."

"He's not ignoring me. He's just... processing."

"Processing what, exactly?"

Tui finally looked at me. There was something defensive in his expression—the particular guardedness of someone who knew they'd made a mistake and didn't want to admit it. "It's complicated."

"Is it?" I set down the shirt I'd been folding, giving him my full attention. "Because from where I'm standing, it seems pretty simple. He overheard something that hurt him, and now he's pulling away."

"You don't know that he overheard—"

"Come on, Tui." The frustration was leaking into my voice now, despite my best efforts to contain it. "He was going to deliver the flowers himself. Yuki said he came to the door, and then suddenly he was crying and asking her to deliver them instead. What other explanation is there?"

Tui's jaw tightened. "Even if he did hear something, he might have misunderstood the context—"

"What context makes it better?" I pushed off from the couch, standing now because sitting felt too passive for this conversation. "You called him a kid. I was there. You said he was too young, too innocent, that you couldn't feel what you feel about him because he's barely nineteen and you've already lived through things that would—" I stopped, realizing I was practically quoting him.

"I was talking to you." Tui's voice rose slightly. "In private. I was trying to explain—"

"It's clear he was there." The words came out harder than I intended. "He probably heard every word. Every excuse you've been making for months about why you can't just be honest with him."

"I'm trying to protect him—"

"From what?" I heard my voice crack with frustration and didn't care. "From the devastating experience of being loved by someone who actually sees him? From the trauma of someone choosing him first? That's what you're protecting him from?"

Tui's expression shifted. Something darker flickering behind his eyes. "You don't understand—"

"I understand plenty." I was pacing now, my body unable to contain the energy of this conversation. "I understand that you've been dancing around this for months."



That everyone—everyone—can see how you feel about him except apparently you. I understand that he brings you flowers every week and you find reasons to be busy. That he lights up when you walk into a room and you pretend not to notice."

"Hong—"

"I told you to be careful what you say when you don't know who's listening." The words tumbled out, weeks of observation finally finding their voice. "I told you that treating your feelings like they're shameful would eventually hurt someone. And now it has. Now he thinks you see him as just some kid. Some child who isn't worth your time."

"That's not—" Tui started.

"Then what is it?" I stopped pacing, facing him directly. "Because from where Lego's standing, that's exactly what it looks like. Years of him showing up for you, caring for you, bringing sunshine into this shop every chance he gets, and you can't even admit out loud that he matters to you."

The silence that followed was thick enough to choke on.

Tui finally looked at me, and there was something almost pleading in his expression—a silent request to drop it, to let him off the hook, to go back to the comfortable avoidance they'd both been practicing.

"Hong."

I waited, refusing to fill it, letting the weight of the question press down on both of us.

"I called him a kid," Tui admitted. The words came out heavy, reluctant, dragged up from somewhere he'd been trying to bury them. "I said he was too young. That I couldn't—that I shouldn't feel what I feel because he's barely nineteen and I'm—"

"Twenty-three," I interrupted. "Four years. That's what you're so afraid of? Four years?"

"It's not just the age—"

"Then what is it?" I could feel my own frustration rising, the carefully maintained calm starting to crack. "Because from where I'm standing, it looks like you're making excuses. It looks like you're so terrified of taking a risk that you'd rather hurt him than admit you want something."

"That's not—" Tui started, but I didn't let him finish.

"I saw him on Thursday," I said, and the words landed like stones. "At the university. We talked for a few minutes."

Tui went very still.

"He looked calm," I continued, merciless now because someone had to be. "Really calm. Like someone who's finally made peace with something. Like someone who's decided to stop hoping."

"Hong—"

"It's clear he was there, Tui." I gestured vaguely toward the front door, toward the street outside, toward the flower shop that sat across the way like a reminder neither of us could escape. "Yuki said he was going to deliver the flowers himself. But then he came back crying, saying he had to leave and asking her to deliver them instead."

"We don't know—" Tui started, his voice rising in defensive protest.

"We don't know?" I cut him off, incredulous. "He probably heard us, that's why he didn't come in. That's why he didn't come in. He was right outside the door, and he heard what we were saying, and—" I took a breath, trying to control the anger that was building in my chest. "I told you to be more careful about what you say when—"

"You're just making things worse," Tui interrupted, his own voice rising now to match mine. His hands were flat on the counter, his body leaning forward, the careful calm he usually wore finally cracking. "You don't know that for certain. You're assuming—"

"I'm making things worse?" The incredulity in my voice was sharp enough to cut. "I'm not the one who's been dancing around his feelings for months while everyone else has to watch the slow-motion disaster unfold—"

"That's not fair—"

"—and now he probably thinks you actually believe he's just some kid who isn't worth your time!"

The words hung in the air between us, brutal and honest and impossible to take back.

Tui's face had gone pale. His mouth opened, closed, opened again—searching for words that wouldn't come. I could see the impact of what I'd said landing, could see the way it was sinking in, the realization of what his careless words might have done.

But I was too angry to stop now. Too angry and too tired and too frustrated with watching two people I cared about destroy something before it even had a chance to exist.

"You've been playing this game for months," I said, my voice quieter now but no less intense. "Watching him. Caring about him. Finding excuses to be near him but

never close enough to actually mean anything. And every time someone points it out—every time I try to tell you to just do something about it—you retreat back into your fear and your excuses and your bullshit about age and timing and not being ready."

"You don't understand—"

"Then help me understand!" I threw my hands up in frustration. "Because from where I'm standing, it looks like you're punishing yourself for something that hasn't even happened. It looks like you've decided you're going to hurt him eventually, so you might as well hurt him now and save yourself the trouble of trying."

Tui flinched like I'd struck him.

Good. Maybe it would finally get through.

"He's been in love with you for months, and everyone can see it except you—or maybe you see it and you're just pretending you don't because that's easier than admitting you feel the same way."

"I know how he feels." Tui's voice was barely audible. "That's the problem."

"The problem is that you're a fool." I said it flatly, without heat, the anger draining out of me and leaving something colder in its place. "You've been acting like a fool for months, and everyone can see it except you."

I grabbed my things. Backpack. Jacket. The sketchbook I'd abandoned on the counter when this conversation had derailed into confrontation. My hands were shaking slightly—adrenaline, probably, the aftermath of saying things I'd been holding back for too long.

Tui reached toward me, his hand outstretched as if to stop me from leaving. "Hong, wait—can we just talk about this—"

But I sidestepped him, moving around his outstretched arm with a dancer's instinct for avoiding obstacles. I didn't want to be touched right now. Didn't want to soften. Didn't want to give him the comfort of reconciliation when he hadn't done anything to earn it.

"I'm going to university." My voice was sharp, controlled, the hurt buried under layers of practiced composure. "Get your head straight, you idiot."

I was almost to the door when I noticed him.

Est.

He was standing, an expression on his face that suggested he'd walked into the middle of something he wasn't prepared for. His eyes moved between me and Tui,

reading the tension, processing whatever he'd overheard.

Great. An audience for the disaster.

I forced my expression into something neutral, something that wouldn't reveal how close to the edge I was. "Hello and goodbye, Est." The words came out almost normal, almost casual, as if I was just passing through on my way to somewhere else. "Maybe you can talk some sense into him."

And then I was through the door, the bell chiming its cheerful mockery behind me, the afternoon sunlight hitting my face like a physical presence.

The walk to university was a blur of motion and emotion.

I kept my pace fast, my head down, my hands shoved in my pockets to hide the way they wouldn't stop trembling. The city moved around me—traffic and pedestrians and the endless background noise of a million lives intersecting—but I barely registered any of it.

You shouldn't have said all that.

The thought surfaced, guilt-edged and unavoidable. I'd been too harsh. Too direct. Too willing to cut through the bullshit without considering whether Tui was ready to hear it.

But someone had to say it. Someone had to force him to look at what he was doing, what he'd been doing for months—circling around Lego like a moth around a flame, close enough to feel the warmth but never brave enough to risk getting burned.

And meanwhile Lego just kept burning. Kept smiling. Kept bringing flowers and making small talk and pretending everything was fine while his heart was quietly breaking.

I thought about Thursday again. That calm on Lego's face. That quiet sadness. The way he'd said he was already planning to come to the exhibition, like supporting other people's achievements was just something he did automatically, regardless of his own pain.

Just because someone smiles a lot doesn't mean they're happy inside.

The words surfaced from somewhere—a story, maybe, or something someone had said once. It felt true. It felt like a description of someone I'd been watching for months without fully seeing.

Lego was exhausted. Working three jobs while going to school. Taking care of William. Navigating the complicated grief of parents who'd moved on without him. Carrying hope for a relationship that might never happen.

And now even that hope was fading. I'd seen it in his eyes on Thursday—the resignation, the careful letting go. He was protecting himself the only way he knew how, by expecting nothing, by preparing for disappointment, by making peace with the idea that this was as good as it was going to get.

It made me want to shake Tui until his teeth rattled.

The university buildings rose ahead of me, familiar shapes against the afternoon sky. I slowed my pace as I approached, trying to regulate my breathing, to smooth the anger off my face before I had to interact with classmates and professors and all the people who expected Hong to be calm and composed and in control.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. I ignored it. It buzzed again. And again. Finally, I pulled it out, glancing at the screen. Nut's name glowed there, accompanied by a series of messages that scrolled past faster than I could read them.

Nut: hey are you okay??

Nut: Hong??

Nut: I can tell something's wrong

Nut: where are you

I stared at the messages for a long moment, my thumb hovering over the keyboard. How did he always know? How did he always seem to sense when something was off, even when I was doing everything in my power to hide it?

Because he pays attention, a voice in my head supplied. Because he sees you. Because he cares.

I typed a response before I could second-guess myself.

Hong: I'm fine. Heading to uni for exhibition prep.

The reply came almost instantly.

Nut: that's not an answer and you know it

Nut: want me to come meet you?

Nut: I can bring food

Nut: or just company

Nut: or both

Nut: probably both

Despite everything—the anger and the frustration and the hollow exhaustion that

was settling into my bones—I felt the corner of my mouth twitch toward a smile.

Nut. Relentless, earnest, impossible to ignore Nut.

I should say no. Should maintain the boundaries I'd been carefully constructing for weeks. Should keep him at arm's length the way I'd been keeping everyone at arm's length, because letting people close was dangerous, because caring about people meant watching them make terrible choices and feeling powerless to stop them. But I was tired. And the university felt very far away. And the thought of sitting in a quiet gallery with someone who actually wanted to be there—someone who would ask if I was okay and mean it, who would listen without judging, who would make me eat something and then probably make me laugh about something stupid—

Hong: Fine.

Hong: But you're buying.

Nut: already ordering

I pocketed my phone and kept walking.

The afternoon sun was warm on my shoulders. Somewhere behind me, Tui was probably still standing in the studio, processing everything I'd said. Somewhere across the city, Lego was probably smiling at customers, hiding his heartbreak behind professional competence. Somewhere in a high-rise apartment, William was probably staring at canvases, fighting his daily battles against his own mind.

And I was here, walking toward a gallery full of my paintings, waiting for someone who cared too much about my answers to accept my deflections.

What a mess, I thought. What a beautiful, terrible, complicated mess we've all made.

The university gates appeared ahead, and I straightened my shoulders, smoothed my expression, prepared to put on the calm exterior everyone expected. But underneath the mask, something had shifted. I'd said what needed to be said. The truth was out now, hanging in the air, impossible to ignore. What Tui did with it—whether he finally got his head straight or continued being a fool—was up to him.

But at least I'd tried. At least I'd been brave enough to say the hard things out loud. And maybe that would have to be enough.

Saturday arrived like a held breath finally released. I woke slowly, consciousness returning in layers—first the awareness of soft sheets, then the muted light filtering through curtains I'd forgotten to open, then the particular silence of an empty house. No nephew's laughter echoing from downstairs. No sister calling me to breakfast. No sounds at all except the distant hum of traffic and the occasional bird outside my window.

The family home felt different when it was empty. Larger, somehow. The spaces between things more pronounced. I lay there for a while, staring at the ceiling, letting my mind drift without direction. The events of yesterday—the fight with Tui, the walk to clear my head, the unexpected coffee with Nut—felt like they belonged to a different version of me. A version who had emotions so strong they spilled out in sharp words and sharper truths.

Today's version just felt tired.

Home felt different when no one else was in it. Usually, there was noise. My sister moving through the kitchen with her particular morning efficiency, the clatter of dishes and the whistle of the kettle. Kevin's small voice asking questions about everything—Why is the sky blue? Why do birds sing? Why does Uncle Hong have silver hair?—his four-year-old curiosity relentless and charming in equal measure. The television playing cartoons too loud, the sound of small feet running down the hallway, the particular chaos of a household with a child in it.

But today, silence.

I checked my phone, squinting against the brightness of the screen. 11:47 AM. My sister had texted hours ago—a photo of Kevin at the park, his face smeared with ice cream, a caption that read: Someone convinced me breakfast could be dessert. We'll be back this evening.

I smiled despite myself. Kevin had inherited his mother's talent for persuasion.

Scrolling further, I found the messages I'd been half-expecting, half-dreading. Tui's response to my apology from yesterday sat there, read but not yet processed.

I'm sorry for how I said it. I still meant what I said, but I could have been kinder about it. You're my friend. I don't want to hurt you.

His response had come an hour later:

I'm sorry too. You were right about most of it. I've been a fool. It was a silly argument that got out of hand. It's okay. I was being an idiot. You were right to call me out. We're good?

We're good, I'd replied. And we were, probably. The fight had been necessary—a pressure valve releasing steam that had been building for months. Sometimes the people who cared about you had to shake you, had to say the hard things, had to risk the relationship to save you from yourself.

I hoped it had worked. I hoped something I'd said had gotten through.

Below Tui's message thread, another name glowed on my screen. Nut. A series of messages sent three hours ago, when I'd still been dead to the world.

Nut: Good morning!

Nut: Wait actually it's almost afternoon

Nut: Good almost-afternoon!

Nut: Did you sleep okay?

Nut: I hope you're sleeping okay

Nut: You seemed tired yesterday

Nut: Anyway text me when you're awake!

Nut: No pressure

Nut: But also text me

I stared at the messages for longer than was probably normal, something warm and complicated unfurling in my chest. Nut. Relentless, earnest, impossible Nut, who sent too many messages and used too many emoji and somehow made all of it endearing instead of annoying.

Yesterday's lunch had been... good. Better than good. He'd shown up at the university with enough food to feed five people, insisted on eating in the courtyard near my exhibition space so I could "be near my art," and spent two hours asking me questions about every piece on display. Not the polite, surface-level questions most people asked. Real questions. Why did you choose that color palette? What were you feeling when you painted this? Is this one about someone specific? And I'd answered. Honestly, mostly. More honestly than I usually did with anyone who wasn't family. It had felt dangerous. It had felt like opening a door I'd been keeping carefully locked.

I rolled out of bed finally, my stomach announcing its displeasure at having been ignored for so long. The house was still and quiet as I padded down the hallway, my feet silent on the wooden floors that had creaked under my weight since childhood.

The kitchen was clean—my sister's doing, always—but there was evidence of life everywhere. Gavin's drawings magnetized to the refrigerator. A half-finished grocery list on the counter. The particular organized chaos of a home that was lived in, loved in, full even when it was empty.

I filled the kettle and set it to boil, then opened the cabinet where we kept the tea.

The flower teas were arranged in a neat row, their glass jars catching the light from the window. Lego's gift, from months ago now—a selection of dried blooms that transformed into something beautiful when hot water touched them. My sister had fallen in love with them immediately, had gone back to the flower shop to buy more,



had developed particular favorites for particular moods.

I selected one at random—jasmine, probably, or maybe osmanthus—and measured the dried flowers into a clear glass mug. When the water was ready, I poured it over the blooms and watched them unfurl, slowly transforming from tight brown buds into something delicate and alive.

Like the resurrection plant, I thought. Like the one Est had apparently bought from Lego's shop. Dead things coming back to life when you gave them what they needed.

I grabbed a cookie from the jar on the counter—butter and sugar, my sister's recipe—and leaned against the cabinets, watching the tea continue to bloom. The flowers were beautiful. Delicate pink petals floating in golden water, releasing their fragrance into the steam.

Without quite planning to, I pulled out my phone and took a photo.

The lighting wasn't perfect—kitchen fluorescents weren't exactly flattering—but there was something appealing about the composition anyway. The clear glass mug. The floating flowers. The cookie in my hand, slightly out of focus in the foreground. A moment of morning quiet, captured.

I sent it to Lego before I could second-guess myself.

Hong: [image]

Hong: Your tea is still the best thing in this house

Then I navigated to Nut's thread and typed out a response, equally quick, equally unguarded.

Hong: Just woke up. Your concern is noted and mildly alarming.

Hong: I'm fine. Going to drink tea and exist for a while.

The replies came almost simultaneously.

From Nut, predictably immediate:

Nut: EXISTING IS IMPORTANT

Nut: I support your existence

Nut: What kind of tea?

From Lego, a moment later, a photo appearing in our chat: A bowl of strawberries, red and gleaming, artfully arranged on what looked like a cutting board. The lighting was better than mine—natural light from a window, probably—and there was

something about the composition that felt intentional. Lego had an eye for these things, even when he wasn't trying.

Lego: I want something sweet

Lego: Do you have free time today?

I smiled at my phone, the expression coming before I could stop it. Between classes and exhibition prep and the drama of yesterday's fight, I hadn't spent much time with Lego lately. The last real conversation we'd had was Thursday, in the university hallway, both of us pretending we didn't know what we knew. Maybe it was time to stop pretending.

Hong: Sure, I'm home alone

Hong: What did you have in mind?

The typing indicator appeared, disappeared, appeared again. Then:

Lego: Come over?

Lego: We could watch a movie

Lego: I'm making something with these strawberries

Lego: It might be good or it might be a disaster

Lego: Either way there will be sugar involved

I laughed—actually laughed, the sound surprising in the quiet kitchen. This was so typically Lego. The enthusiasm, the slight self-deprecation, the promise of something sweet to smooth over any potential awkwardness.

Hong: I'm in

Hong: Give me an hour to become human

Lego: Take your time!

Lego: I'll be here

Lego: With strawberries

Lego: And possibly whipped cream

Lego: Okay definitely whipped cream

I pocketed my phone and turned my attention back to my tea, the flowers now fully bloomed, the fragrance filling the kitchen. An hour. That gave me time to shower, to eat the lunch my sister had undoubtedly left for me, to put on something that

wasn't the oversized t-shirt I'd slept in.

And to think. About Lego, and what I'd seen in his face on Thursday. About Nut, and what I was afraid to let him see in mine. About the shape of conversations that were coming, whether I was ready for them or not.

The shower helped.

Hot water and steam and the particular clarity that came from standing under a spray until your skin turned pink and your thoughts stopped racing. I stayed longer than I needed to, letting the warmth work the remaining tension out of my shoulders, watching the water swirl down the drain and trying not to think too hard about anything. When I finally emerged, wrapped in a towel and leaving wet footprints on the bathroom tiles, I felt more human. Cleaner, in ways that went beyond the physical.

I dressed carefully—more carefully than a casual movie afternoon probably warranted, but I was discovering that I liked how my own clothes fit now that they were actually mine, actually designed by me. The black t-shirt with the flower girl design sat well against my skin, the print quality better than I'd dared hope when I'd first submitted the files. Jeans that fit properly. My Converse, the ones with the small moth I'd drawn on the toe during a boring lecture last semester.

A jacket, because the weather was unpredictable and I'd learned the hard way that buses could be freezing even when the outside world was warm.

I found my sister's lunch in the refrigerator—rice and vegetables and something that might have been chicken, neatly packaged in containers with my name written on a sticky note. Eat this or I'll know, the note read. Love you.

I took a photo before eating, sending it to her chat with a thumbs up emoji. Evidence of compliance. She'd trained me well. The food was good—it always was—and I ate slowly, scrolling through social media between bites.

My store accounts were doing well. The follower count had jumped again overnight, probably thanks to Yuki's concert appearance. She'd worn the flower girl shirt on, the design visible in the photos that were still circulating, still being shared and commented on and analyzed by people who had no idea the artist was just some guy eating leftovers in his childhood kitchen.

And the photos of Lego modeling the baby tees—those were still performing, still bringing in traffic, still generating sales. He looked good in them, comfortable and natural in a way that professional models rarely achieved. Maybe because he wasn't trying to be anything other than himself. Maybe because the softness he projected was genuine, not performed.

I finished eating, washed my dishes, checked the time. Still early, but I was restless

now, eager to be moving. The house felt too quiet, too still, too full of the particular silence that came from being alone with your thoughts for too long.

The bus ride was familiar. Same route I took to university, same stops, same views from the window. I watched the city scroll past—the temple with its golden spires, the market streets with their colorful awnings, the apartment buildings rising higher as we moved into the newer part of town.

Lego's building was nicer than I'd expected the first time I'd visited. He didn't talk about money, didn't talk about his parents beyond the bare minimum acknowledgment that they existed, that they sent checks, that they'd essentially paid him to stay out of their new lives. But the apartment itself told a story. A large space for someone so young. Good neighborhood. The kind of rent that required either serious financial support or a level of debt that would take years to escape. Lego had the former. I wondered sometimes if he'd have preferred the latter.

The elevator carried me upward, and I found his door without difficulty—the kitten rug outside unmistakable, its printed face cheerfully welcoming anyone who approached. I'd noticed it the first time I came here, the day my sister had bandaged his feet after he'd worked himself into collapse. The rug had seemed incongruous then, too soft and whimsical for the serious conversation we'd needed to have. Now it just seemed like Lego. Soft things as armor. Cheerfulness as defense.

I knocked.

The door opened almost immediately—he must have been waiting, listening for footsteps—and there he was. Lego, in full domestic mode, looking younger somehow without the extensions and the elaborate outfits he wore for work.

"P'Hong!" His face lit up, the smile immediate and apparently genuine. "You came!"

"You invited me." I pointed out, but I was smiling too. Something about his enthusiasm was contagious, impossible to resist.

He was wearing a light blue sweater with white stripes—oversized, of course, the sleeves covering most of his hands—and pajama pants in a darker blue. No shoes, just socks with teddy bear faces on them. His hair, natural and shorter than I'd seen it in months, was pulled back in a small half-ponytail, a star-shaped clip keeping the strands out of his face.

He looked comfortable. He looked soft. He looked like someone in their own space, their safe place, not performing for anyone.

"Come in, come in!" He stepped back, gesturing me inside with the enthusiasm of someone who didn't get many visitors. "I was just finishing up—there was a minor whipped cream incident but everything is under control now—"

I stepped into the apartment and stopped, taking it in. It wasn't the first time I'd been here, but the space still surprised me. The colors, first—pastel everywhere, soft pinks and lavenders and mint greens that should have clashed but somehow cohered. The stuffed animals, arranged on every available surface, watching with their button eyes. The blankets draped over furniture, creating layers of softness that made the whole apartment feel like the inside of a cloud.

It was clean, too. Almost aggressively clean, the kind of tidiness that spoke of someone who controlled their environment because there was so little else they could control. Every cushion was arranged just so. Every surface was clear of clutter. The chaos was intentional, aesthetic, carefully curated. This was Lego's nest. His fortress of soft things against a world that had been hard to him.

"Your kitchen is a disaster." I observed, following him toward the source of the strawberry photos.

And it was. Whipped cream on the counter. Strawberry stems in a pile by the cutting board. Mixing bowls and measuring cups and a stand mixer that looked recently wrestled into submission.

"A minor disaster," Lego corrected, grabbing a towel to wipe up a particularly egregious cream splatter. "But it was worth it. Look—"

He opened the refrigerator with a flourish, and I leaned in to see. A strawberry shortcake. Actual, proper strawberry shortcake, with layers of sponge and cream and berries arranged in careful spirals on top. It looked like something from a bakery window, professional and precise.

"God," I said, genuinely impressed. "You take everything to another level."

Lego beamed, the praise landing visibly, pinking his cheeks. "I found a recipe online. It seemed... doable? And I had the strawberries, and the whipped cream was on sale, and then I was already making the cake so I thought, why not make it pretty?"

Why not make it pretty. Such a simple question, containing multitudes about how Lego moved through the world.

"You've never made this before?" I asked, watching him carefully extract the cake from the fridge.

"First time." He grabbed two plates from a cabinet, two forks from a drawer, moving through his kitchen with the ease of someone who spent a lot of time here alone. "So if it's terrible, you have to lie to me."

"I'm not going to lie to you."

"Then just make a face that could be interpreted as either enjoyment or polite suffering. I'll choose to believe the first."

I laughed, shaking my head. "Deal."

We ended up in his bedroom, because that's where the computer was, and the computer was the only way to watch the movie he'd selected. His bed was enormous—too big for one person, really, piled with more stuffed animals and soft blankets—and we settled against the headboard with plates balanced on our laps, the laptop open between us.

The cake was not terrible. The cake was, in fact, genuinely good—the sponge light and airy, the cream rich without being overwhelming, the strawberries sweet and fresh. I said so, multiple times, and watched Lego's face cycle through surprise and pleasure and something that looked almost like relief.

"I'm glad," he said, licking whipped cream off his fork with no trace of self-consciousness. "I was worried. Baking is chemistry, you know? If you mess up the measurements, everything falls apart."

"You didn't mess up."

"This time."

On the screen, the movie began. I recognized it vaguely—something about teenagers and trauma and finding connection despite everything. The kind of quiet, emotional film that wouldn't demand constant attention, that could be background noise for the conversation we were probably going to have whether I was ready for it or not. We watched for a while in comfortable silence, eating our cake, existing in each other's space. The bedroom was dim, curtains half-drawn, the light from the laptop screen casting soft shadows. It felt intimate, but not in a way that was uncomfortable. Just... close. Like we'd been friends for longer than we actually had.

"So," Lego said eventually, setting aside his empty plate and pulling a stuffed rabbit into his lap, "you want to tell me about what's happening with P'Nut?"

I nearly choked on my last bite of strawberry.

"Subtle." I managed, coughing slightly.

Lego grinned, unrepentant. "You've been texting him all week. I can see it on your face every time your phone buzzes. You get this look."

"What look?"

"Like you're happy but also terrified. It's very distinctive."

I set my own plate aside, considering whether to deflect or dive in. The movie continued in the background, a scene of the characters at a party, the dialogue muffled by the larger conversation we were about to have. "We've been... spending time together," I admitted. "More than before. Lunches. Coffee. He came to the

exhibition prep yesterday, even though he didn't have to."

"That sounds nice."

"It is nice. That's the problem."

Lego tilted his head, the star clip catching the light. "How is nice a problem?"

I pulled my legs up, wrapping my arms around my knees—a defensive posture, probably, but I needed the comfort of being small right now. "Because nice leads to more. And more leads to expectations. And expectations lead to—" I stopped, the words catching in my throat.

Lego waited. Patient, quiet, giving me space the way you gave space to something fragile that might shatter if you moved too fast.

"I've been thinking about it a lot," I said finally, the words coming slowly, each one deliberate. "About what happens next. About what he wants from me. About what I can actually give."

"And?"

"And I don't think I can date him." The confession felt like glass in my throat. "Not when I want something more. Something serious."

Lego's brow furrowed, confused. "Isn't wanting something serious a reason to date him?"

"It should be." I laughed, but there was no humor in it. "It should be, but it's not, because—"

I stopped again. My eyes were stinging now, the pressure building behind them, warning of tears I didn't want to shed but couldn't seem to stop.

"Because I've never been able to maintain relationships for very long." The words spilled out now, rushing like water through a crack in a dam. "Not with girls. Not with guys. Every time it starts to get serious, every time they start wanting to... to move forward, to be physical, I make excuses. I find reasons to end things. I run."

Lego was still watching me, his expression shifting from confusion to something gentler. Understanding, maybe. Or the beginning of it.

"I've spent years," I continued, my voice cracking, "thinking something was wrong with me. Wondering why I couldn't just be normal, why I couldn't want the things everyone else seemed to want. Why the thought of—of sex, of that kind of intimacy—made me feel sick instead of excited."

"P'Hong—"

"I think I'm asexual." The word came out small, almost a whisper. "I think I've always been, and I just didn't have a word for it. Didn't know there was a word for it. I thought I was broken, for so long. I thought I'd just never find someone who could—who would—" My voice gave out entirely.

The tears came. Not dramatic sobs, not a breakdown—just quiet wetness sliding down my cheeks, the release of something I'd been holding for years. My sister knew. My sister had held me through a version of this conversation when I was sixteen, had wiped my tears and told me I wasn't broken, had done the research herself and shown me communities and resources and the proof that I wasn't alone. But telling someone else—someone outside the safety of family—that was different. That was harder. That was terrifying.

Lego moved. I felt the bed shift, felt his arms come around me, pulling me into a hug that was soft and warm and exactly what I needed. He smelled like strawberries and vanilla, like cake batter and comfort. He didn't say anything at first, just held me while I shook.

The movie was still playing. Something emotional was happening on screen, characters having their own breakthrough, but I couldn't focus on it. Everything was narrowed to this moment—the weight of Lego's arms, the sound of my own ragged breathing, the particular relief of finally saying the thing out loud.

"Thank you," Lego said finally, his voice close to my ear, "for telling me."

I sniffed, wiping my face against his shoulder in a way that was probably gross and definitely undignified. "For making your sweater wet?"

"For trusting me." His arms tightened briefly, a squeeze of reassurance. "For telling me something that matters. I know that's not easy."

"It's not." I pulled back slightly, enough to see his face. His eyes were soft, free of judgment, full of the particular compassion of someone who understood what it meant to carry weight in silence. "My sister is the only other person who knows. I told her when I was a teenager, when I was still trying to figure out what was wrong with me."

"Nothing's wrong with you."

"I know. Now. Mostly." I wiped my face with my sleeve, trying to compose myself. "But for a long time, I thought there was. And now, with Nut—"

"Don't you want to tell him?" Lego asked. The question was gentle, curious, without pressure.

"I don't know." I shook my head, the uncertainty genuine. "I don't know how he'll react. He's so... enthusiastic, you know? So physical, with his hugs and his arm



touches and his general lack of boundaries. What if he wants things I can't give? What if telling him ruins everything before it even starts?"

Lego was quiet for a moment, considering. The movie had shifted to something more subdued—David Bowie's voice, I realized, singing something slow and grand.

"Do you like him?" Lego asked finally. "Really like him? Not just tolerate him, not just find him amusing—actually have feelings?"

"Yes." The answer came without hesitation. "That's what makes this so terrifying."

"Then he deserves to know who you are." Lego's voice was soft but certain. "The real you. Not the version you think he wants, not the performance you've been giving everyone. The truth."

"What if the truth is too much?"

"Then he wasn't right for you anyway." Lego shrugged, the movement jostling me slightly. "But you won't know until you try. And he might surprise you. People sometimes do."

I thought about that. About Nut, with his relentless messages and his genuine smiles and the way he looked at me like I was worth looking at. About the way he asked questions and actually listened to the answers. About the way he'd shown up yesterday when I needed someone, no questions asked, no expectations attached.

Maybe Lego was right. Maybe the only way forward was through.

"Your cake is very good." I said, the topic change deliberate but necessary. I needed a moment. Needed to process. Needed to let the rawness settle before I could think clearly about what came next.

Lego laughed, the sound bright and surprised in the quiet room. "That's your response? After all that?"

"I'm emotionally compromised. Let me deflect."

"Fine." He released me from the hug, settling back against the headboard, the stuffed rabbit reclaimed and hugged to his chest. "But I'm going to hold you to a real conversation about this eventually. You don't get to just cry on my shoulder and then pretend it didn't happen."

"I would never." I wiped my face one more time, taking a steadying breath. "But maybe... not today. Today I want to eat cake and watch sad movies and not think too hard about the future."

"I can do that." Lego grabbed the plates, already moving to get second slices. "More cake?"

"Obviously."

He disappeared toward the kitchen, and I sat there in his soft, pastel bedroom, surrounded by stuffed animals and the fading notes of classic rock, feeling lighter than I had in weeks.

I'd said it. Out loud. To someone who wasn't family, who had no obligation to accept me, who could have reacted with confusion or rejection or the particular discomfort of not knowing what to say. And Lego had just... held me. Had thanked me for trusting him. Had offered wisdom beyond his nineteen years, probably because he'd had to grow up too fast, probably because he understood what it meant to carry things alone.

I was taking a step. A small one, maybe. But movement was movement. And sometimes that was enough.